

May 1985

# TILTING AT WINDMILLS

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**T**he CIA has proposed a bill to punish disclosure of classified information. This will probably be perceived by the left as a threat to freedom of the press, as indeed it is probably intended to be by the administration. But have no fear as long as one section remains in the bill. It says that those

accused can escape conviction if the documents were not "properly classified."

The fact is that there are few government documents that are not overclassified. When I worked in the Kennedy-Johnson administration, we routinely classified material as "Confidential" simply because it might embarrass some bureaucrat.

I am indebted to Richard Halloran of *The New York Times* for an example of the absurd heights the classifiers reach every day. It is a paragraph taken from a memorandum setting out the objectives for the Navy's 1968 budget. It reads:

"The Navy must continue to attract and retain sufficient numbers of high-quality, skilled, and motivated people. Compensation and quality of life improvements must be competitive in the job market. Ways must be found to reduce requirements for administrative functions, reduce personal turbulence, and permanent change of station moves."

The paragraph was classified "Secret."...

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**A**nother absurdity of our security procedures is the foreign nationals who work in our embassies. Remember when the CIA was crying treason at the radical magazines that published the names of CIA station chiefs? *The Washington Monthly* pointed out at that time that each embassy had scores of host national employees who knew perfectly well who the top CIA people were in their country.

How did the custom of hiring these people begin? As best I can determine, it originated in the need for translators—Americans, remember, are notoriously incapable or scornful of learning foreign languages—and the need for servants, which was justified on the basis of "this is the customary way of life for the people with whom we associate here."

You may have read the

recent revelations that our embassy in Moscow was bugged from 1982 to 1984. If you can't guess who planted the devices, *The Washington Times*, which was more enterprising on this story than most papers, reported:

"There are between 100 and 130 Soviets working at the U.S. embassy at any given time. They handle routine maintenance, electrical and plumbing repairs, do the building cleaning, and, until recently, answered the telephones.

"Soviet personnel also are used as auto mechanics and drivers for U.S. diplomats. They run the food service operations and man the kiosk in the embassy where liquor is sold."

I suspect the main bureaucratic motivation behind the growth of foreign staff in our embassies is evasion of personnel ceilings. Every government agency that serves abroad is from time to time working under limits—imposed by Congress, the OMB, or the agency's own administration—as to the number of personnel "slots" available at each post. Generally, foreign hires have not been counted under these ceilings. So if you're a mission chief and want to get an employee on board without a lot of bother—especially when you don't want to admit you're hiring another employee whose main function is to make life more comfortable for the American diplomats—the simple solution has usually been to hire a citizen of the local country. These employees are given security clearances by the local embassy staff, but the plain

fact is that they are citizens not of our country but of their own country, to which their primary loyalty belongs. In some embassies, it doesn't make any difference whether the employees are loyal to us—indeed, some embassies are so unimportant the question is not who should staff them but whether we need the embassies at all—but it does seem insane to have foreign personnel inside sensitive posts, especially in countries where the government is hostile to our own....

—Charles Peters

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